



GROW 103

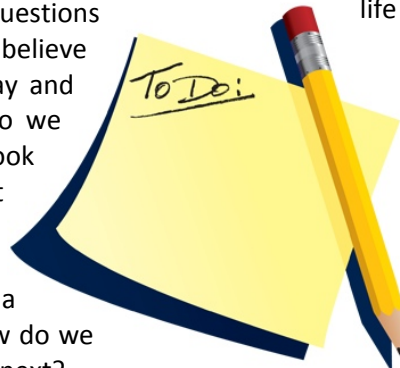
WHAT?

So we should find our hope in our vocation – that we are called to a royal priesthood alongside Jesus through the power of his Spirit – but we must do so by living in anticipation of a kingdom that is here and yet to come. But how does that work? If you are honest with yourself, you probably have several questions about this vocation. For example, if we believe that The Way of Jesus is the RIGHT way and will one day be the ONLY way, how do we reconcile that with the fact when we look around us, we see much different powers at work? And if we agree that following The Way is more than just keeping rules but is rather more about a changed heart and a renewed mind, how do we decide how to act? In other words, what next?

will be the one who serves? Has this guy ever been to Washington D.C.? None of this makes any sense.



Since we are part of the kingdom now, how do the preceding qualities of the kingdom square with your life experience? Your church experience?



These are just examples of the inside-out impact of the kingdom on the world. Clearly, what the world has become does not match God's original intent. Likewise, the kingdom's impact on our lives should rearrange our priorities. In Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus, he tells us where to start.

PRIORITIES

It starts with re-aligning our priorities. Read Mark, chapter 10. Notice how Jesus, like he did with our perceptions of blessing in the beatitudes, reframes the world's priorities and turns them upside-down. Apparently, his kingdom is totally counter-intuitive. In God's kingdom...

1. Male-female relations must return to the original intent: L _____ - L _____ C _____.
2. A R _____ man will be at a D _____.
3. P _____ doesn't come from P _____ but S _____ and S _____.


In the space of a few short verses, we see a new way to look at sex, money, and power. But let's be honest – if you ignored whatever Christian training you have and tried to look at these assertions objectively, you would think Jesus was crazy. Marriage for life? I have enough trouble committing to a favorite sports team. Money makes things harder? Not in my experience. The first

*I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may **know** him better. I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may **know** the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe.*

~ Ephesians 1:17-19a

The goal Paul suggests we strain after, rather than power, prestige, or privilege, should be **knowing** God, **knowing** the hope of his call, **knowing** the glory (or completeness) of his inheritance, and **knowing** the source of his strength. Again, with the kingdom comes a re-definition of what we think we want. Our power comes through his resurrection and his spirit, our prestige comes through his call on our lives, and our privilege comes through the riches of our inheritance as new creations anticipating the renewed kingdom already inaugurated through Jesus' resurrection. Nothing there about material gain, comfort or accolades. But rather, it's all about **knowing** God. This is what Paul means when he says we need to be "transformed by

the renewing of our minds.” We are supposed to desire different things because we think in different ways, and somehow, we are supposed to strain after that different way of thinking. And if we back up a few verses, before Paul suggests we should press on toward perfection or completeness, we see that straining toward it means that if we “know the power of his resurrection” we can share in his sufferings and participate in his resurrection (Phil. 3:10-11).

 What do you think is meant by “knowing the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings?” How about participating in his resurrection?

DISCIPLINE

Remember the writer of Hebrews told us that no discipline is pleasant at first but constitutes a painful but important training period. To desire painful training is not natural or easy. When Paul calls us “new creations” (2 Cor 5:17), he never implies that things will be easy. Walking in the Spirit toward growth isn't something we just drift into. We need to be intentional and focused toward God and his desires. Let's take a look at Romans 5 again.

We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they are good for us—they help us learn to endure. And endurance develops strength of character in us, and character strengthens our confident expectation of salvation. And this expectation will not disappoint us. For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love.

~ Romans 5:3-5 (NLT)

On first reading, it seems absurd to rejoice when we face difficulties and problems, but it's true; every difficult circumstance is an opportunity for spiritual growth. Spiritual growth isn't just something that happens at church or in a Bible study; it is what happens through every challenging moment of the day when we choose to live in connection with Jesus. All of life is an opportunity to grow, one good choice after another.



Think about some of the trials you've experienced. Pick one and share how it helped you learn to endure and strengthened your character.

To paraphrase Romans 5:3-5, our trials help us learn to endure under pressure. That endurance builds our character and our relationship with God. But even when we start to see trials as opportunities for growth, sometimes we still feel like life is defeating us instead of prompting our growth. In certain circumstances, we may have a habitual response that is not from the mind of Christ, and we feel trapped in repeating it. For example, we may realize that every time we're caught in rush-hour traffic we get angry and frustrated.

It's in these situations that we need to become intentional about training for growth. Through the whole experience, we can better understand just how much God loves us and better understand our hope in him because we persist in the Spirit's power and learn new responses.

Intentional training (aka, **spiritual discipline**) consists of practices that aid us in staying connected to Christ and exercises that build our spiritual muscles. Bible study, service, prayer, solitude, fasting, church attendance and listening to inspirational music or reading inspirational books are only a few examples. The goal is not to just read the Bible (for example), but doing so can help us reach the real goal; knowing God or staying connected to him. These practices are not inherently valuable, but derive their value from their ability to help us know God better and stay in step with the Spirit.

A friend who comes alongside us is also helpful. Such a friend or "Spiritual Running Partner" can be invaluable in encouraging us, holding us accountable, and helping us to recognize our blind spots.

So, what does this sort of intentionality look like? The New Testament encourages us to undertake exercises and activities that help us replace old habits with new ones. These habits then enable us to develop virtues

that honor God and allow us to speak into the lives of others. These may begin small and general but might later become more challenging and specific, much like an exercise routine at the gym or taking lessons to learn a musical instrument.

For example, if someone finds he is continually frustrated and angry when driving in rush-hour traffic, he might start by listening to Christian radio in the car and then, down the road (pun intended), intentionally inserting himself into driving situations that he knows will be frustrating in order to build his patience muscles. Doing so may help him focus on Christ rather than the curses he might normally scream at other drivers.

Or if someone struggles with patience, she might intentionally choose the longest line at the supermarket and smile all the way to the cash register.

Or a parent of preschool-aged children might feel angry that she has no time for herself or her spiritual development. Even on the rare day that the children nap at the same time, she finds herself falling asleep while reading the Bible or praying. Staying up late or getting up early might, or perhaps choosing to pray with every diaper change for peace and for opportunities to speak truth into the children's lives might make turn this around. But what's important is that you recognize that discipline is required.



What are some things that trip you up? What tempts you away from being more disciplined?



Of the spiritual disciplines listed on the previous page, which are you pretty good at? (share your methods) Which do you struggle with? (share your struggles)

FRUIT

God's picture of our growth and maturity isn't just one of making us straighten up and do the right things. No,

it's one of growing us into the kind of people who naturally express his characteristics.

"I am the true vine. ... Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself: it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine: you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit: apart from me you can do nothing." ~ John 15:1a, 4-5

In this illustration, Jesus explains himself as the vine and us as the branches. Draw this mental picture: a vine with many branches: on some of the branches, juicy grapes are hanging in large bunches.

This picture of "bearing fruit" is a common illustration in scripture for the new kind of life God is trying to create in us. Think for a moment: how does a branch produce fruit? Does it work really hard? Does it try to be something it's not? No. the obvious answer is that the branch will be very fruitful if one thing is true: it remains connected to the vine. Just like that! The key to a life of character and fulfillment for a Christ-follower is a constant life-giving connection to Jesus.

Jesus continues to say "apart from me you can do nothing." We cannot change ourselves based upon our own efforts any more than a branch lying on the ground can produce grapes. The Christian life is not about trying hard to do the right things; it's about living life with God and experiencing his life flowing through us.

The Bible uses different terms for this connection. In Galatians and Romans, it is called "living by the Spirit" or "walking in the Spirit." Whatever the term used, this refers to an ongoing, continual commitment to staying connected to God, our spiritual life-source.



What's your first reaction to the statement "apart from me you can do nothing?"

Galatians 5 describes something that many Christians have misconstrued called the "fruit of the Spirit." I

believe that this fruit is the wonderful byproduct of you teaming up with the Spirit of Jesus, who lives within the heart of every Christian.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. ~ Galatians 5:22-23

Anyone who grew up in the church knows these by heart. These fruit are a favorite of VBS programs and Sunday School classes the world over. But I think we harbor some troubling misconceptions about them.

First, notice that “fruit” is singular. This passage does not describe “fruits” that can be separated from one another. In other words, if the Spirit is fully present and you cooperate with him, all nine should be present.

Second, notice that the first eight could be construed as gifts, but number nine (self-control) is a choice - you control yourself. In fact, you could probably fake the first eight, but self-control is between you and God. I think Paul includes this one to show us that while this fruit may be impossible to grow on our own, if we stay connected with the Spirit, we can experience all nine.

Finally, let’s consider the fruit in context. Right before Paul lists the fruit, he lists other behaviors that we choose that steer us away from the paths of righteousness...

The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. ~ Galatians 5:19-21

Rather than a random list of prohibitions, as these are often portrayed, I believe this to be a list of “obvious” distractions from the kind of disciplined behaviors that lead us to be able to experience the fruit. This is evidenced by the passage that immediately follows...

Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other. ~ Galatians 5:24-26

We “crucified” our old nature, and we should “keep in step” with the Spirit. Like straining after the goal to know God, WE leave the sinful nature behind by choice. However, do not be mistaken; we cannot do it on our own, thus the call to humility that Paul closes this passage with – do not be conceited and do not envy those who are further along in their walk. Also remember the passage about the vine and branches.

Again, it is more than a list of rules we must follow. It is a new way of life we must choose. Surely, you have heard the old adage, “Give a man a fish and he eats for a day; Teach a man to fish and he eats for a lifetime?” Well, apply that to your Christian walk and you get something like this: “Give a man a rule and you get good behavior for a day; Teach a man to develop a hard-won virtue and he lives Christianly for a lifetime.”



Do a quick inventory of your life right now against the listed fruit of the Spirit. Circle the items on the list that your close friends and family members would say are regularly present in your life.

Love	Joy	Peace
Patience	Kindness	Goodness
Faithfulness	Gentleness	Self-control

Underline those things on the list which you know are painfully and glaringly absent.

SO FAR:

Developing Christian character begins in three areas:

new P _____, spiritual D _____, and bearing F _____.

We can W _____ A _____ from our I _____, or we can W _____ in the S _____; one embraces the S _____ N _____ the other crucifies it.